

Mark Donahue Scan Design Evaluation

I decided to study in Denmark as an exchange student because I had a passion for Scandinavia that I learned from Professor Ingebritsen, was deeply interested in being able to spend more time in Europe, especially for the longer term, and because I wanted to broaden my European experience to include non-German speaking countries. Because Denmark is right next to Germany, it was a perfect choice. The fact that SCAN Design's support makes it so feasible to study in Denmark also influenced my decision.

I chose Aarhus University because a former Scan Design fellow advised me that it not only had better social sciences than Copenhagen, but also that it had better student life because it was a student's town. Based on my experience in both Copenhagen and Aarhus, I would recommend this. Maybe it was because there were so few Americans from UW here in Aarhus, but I really managed to make a lot of lasting connections with European exchange students and Danes.

Aarhus University assigns a mentor, some of whom will be able to meet you at the train station, give you your keys, and escort you to your residence. I was unable to do this because of my mentor's schedule, but I wish that I had. Make sure that you are able to get to the International Centre on time, and know where it is!

There were a number of orientations - Destination DK, and Intro Week. They helped you to meet other students, show you around, and learned Danish. They were fun and really helped to build a social base in a new city, because everyone is doing the same things for two weeks.

Aarhus University is much different from American universities, in that students are treated with much more respect and as equal partners. They are given full access to their department's buildings at all hours of the day, and their relationships with teachers seem to have much less power distance than in the US. The instruction is high quality, but the infrequent class meetings mean that students have to be very self-motivated.

The library has mediocre computer facilities - they don't have nearly as many as Odegaard, for instance, and they don't have many useful applications, like Microsoft Office. However, printing isn't bad, the collection of books is good, and the electronic resources are ok, too.

The quality of instruction was pretty high, but maddeningly casual at times. There are few graded assignments, which means that you often feel an anxiety that says "Am I learning? Am I doing everything right?" However, the instruction was quite good, and I was able to study things that I probably would not have been able to study at UW - I went more into Human Rights and Political Science, something I would not have done at UW. Particularly unique was a course that I took in German that compared Danish and German society.

What I liked best about Aarhus was the student life, the city, the subject matter of the classes. What I liked least was that I wish I had taken classes which met more often. Maybe this is just a natural transition for me personally between undergrad and graduate study... two of my classes were Master's level history.

3rd Year German at Aarhus was more advanced than 4th year German at UW, so it was really a great opportunity to further my Germanics career. The opportunity to take Master's history courses was really great, too, and something that I probably wouldn't have done at UW. This year for me, is a transition into working more independently at different academic institutions, and finding ways to be more self-sufficient and creative about getting funding, finding mentors, and being able to find a great graduate program. The coursework was a natural extension of my coursework at UW in Germanics, International Studies, and History, and definitely at a more advanced level.

Christian Axboe Nielsen is one of the funniest, most academical rigorous, and engaging professors I have ever had. His course about Human Rights took an academically dense and somber issue and made it lighthearted and approachable. He teaches Southeastern European History, Human Rights, and possibly Terrorism .

I was given randomly assigned housing through the International Centre in the posh neighborhood of Risskov. It was in a great neighborhood, a 10 minute bus ride from the university, and a comfortable and clean environment. All of the other students in the house were exchange students, which made it easy to make friends and have common interests. It was conveniently located near a full shopping center, a forest, and a beach.

I would, however, recommend that you try to live in a kollegiet or student housing, because I feel like it makes it easier to meet people, especially danes. They are also more affordable and give you access to more facilities, including common rooms, gyms, TVs, etc. However, because housing is mostly just randomly assigned to you through the international centre, it can be difficult to have freedom of choice.

I didn't hear about anyone being violently attacked here. I would say that you ought to exercise caution about your valuables, but I didn't hear more than a few instances of break-ins. Two friends of mine were injured biking, however - one was hit by a car while crossing the street when she had the right of way, and had pretty severe damage to her knee, which involved surgery. Another friend broke his arm while he was biking on ice. However, Danish healthcare, despite the bureaucracy, seems effective and high-quality.

I integrated into the culture by being active in my classes, particularly danish class. Because it is in the evening and ungraded, it feels more like a club than a class sometimes, and I made many close friends in it. My mentor took a passing interest in me, but I can't say that she and I ever became great friends. Generally, being active socially with other erasmus students, going on trips, attending parties, etc was enough for me to feel like I had a full social calendar. I would also say - treasure your danish friends, it can be difficult to make inroads into danish culture for good reason. However, I will say that I was actively sought out socially by Danes who wanted to be my friend,

and I definitely did not find them to be cold or unapproachable generally.

Cultural differences - I would say that Americans (or at least me) tend to eat simple and low-quality food, which meant that I was not particularly well respected when it came to the hierarchy of the kitchen. Also, language barriers ARE something that you have to address - we have the advantage as anglophones that a lot of people are going to want to use their english on us, and they'll treat us as walking dictionaries/full time english teachers sometimes, but that isn't necessarily a bad thing. I guess that you should be prepared for casual anti-americanism, with people wanting to hear your opinion on thing which they are often ignorant of. But above all, none of this was significant or in any way spoiled my Danish experience.

Because I belong to WSECU, I have only a 1% fee on my debit card account when transferring funds here, so using the ATM was quite easy for me. I normally paid my rent and other official expenses (fees for riding the bus without a ticket... 600 kroner ouch!) at the Danske Bank near the Domkirke downtown. They can take an American Debit card with a 30 kroner fee.

I had a nordea bank account, which came in handy when it came to getting payment from a research study I participated in at Aarhus School of Business, or having my travel grant transferred. However, I didn't use it very much. It was free to open, however.

Unexpected expenses - travel expenses between Copenhagen and Aarhus. I recommend using gomore.dk to find someone willing to drive you for a reduced fee, getting a wild card, or taking the bus in order to save money on the often expensive train ride.

Including Rent and Food (my rent was 2900 kroner per month) I would say that I recommend 3500 kroner per month.

The administration at Scan Design, was always helpful and sympathetic. I think that it would have been nice to have one or two social activities for the whole group planned before the time in Denmark. IPE did an ok job, despite rescinding my student status, but apparently that was my own fault because I did not turn in a medical form.

This program is best suited for someone who is interested in life in Europe, European politics, and the Danish language. I also recommend it for someone who is independent and can take care of things for themselves, because dealing with the bureaucracy at a foreign institution whose primary language is not english can be confusing at times.

My advice would be - don't say no to new opportunities. Also, don't give up on the Danish language - it IS possible for an American to speak or read it, no matter what anyone says. I've encountered such unbelievable pessimism from all nationalities about the worth/feasability of learning Danish. People seem to function here with zero proficiency, but I personally don't understand how that's possible.

Overall Experience

I guess on a scale of 1 to 10, I would give this experience a 9. There's very few things I can find to complain about, other than slightly inflated prices, but Scan Design more than makes up for that. Be prepared to live without the foods you're used to at home, and a lot of the luxuries of American living that we take for granted, like eating out all the time.

You can pursue here pretty much the social life you would have in the US - maybe better, because the Danish school system doesn't really have midterms or ongoing assignments that take up your time.

Denmark isn't a dead-end. But, if you want to get a Job - a real Job - then be willing to commit to staying here for a long time. I know an American girl who, on top of getting a scholarship plus free tuition, works for Vestas, Denmark's most prestigious wind turbine firm. So, success is possible here, but you have to have a lot of patience. Aarhus University can give you a lot of opportunities, but you have to be willing to get out of your comfort zone and focus.

Scan Design gave me the opportunity in the first place, as well as ongoing financial and personal support. I admit that I didn't really rely on the social contacts that I made through scan design very much, or on my mentor, but that's because if you can use the internet you can probably take care of most of your own issues, like registering for classes, making friends, or getting your CPR number. However, Scan Design definitely funded some fun experiences for me, like pointing me out to the USA Youth Debates, probably one of the best experiences of my time here, funding my trip to Copenhagen for Thanksgiving, buying me dinner in Aarhus, and introducing me to the other Americans who I generally had a good time hanging out with.

The challenge that studying here proposes is that you are going to have to work hard to adapt to a different culture and different environment that can be very different from home at times. Getting integrated can involve a lot of frustrations.

In spite of challenges though, studying in Denmark was definitely worthwhile. The greatest benefit of studying in Denmark is that you, an American during the Post-Cold War unipolar world, are making a serious commitment to live in and learn about one of the world's smallest countries. Think about how much humbleness that takes.